

CHRISTOPHER HAMILTON

ALEXANDER PRUSS ON LOVE
AND THE MEANINGFULNESS OF SEX

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Alexander Pruss' book *One Body: an Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics*¹ is long and deals with many topics. It would not be possible adequately to discuss all of them in the present essay. I propose, therefore, to concentrate on those topics that I take to be central to the book and to provide its conceptual grounding. I shall concentrate on his conception of love, on his understanding of the meaningfulness of sexuality, and, related to that, on his discussion of the relations between sexuality and reproduction.

There is no doubt that there is much in the book that stimulates reflection, and for this I am grateful to Pruss for having written the book. However, I ought in fairness to say at the outset that I intend to be critical of Pruss' work: the book seems to me to be unconvincing both in its detailed arguments and in the vision of human sexuality it offers. I shall do my best to make clear why I think this, and give my reasons for my general judgement of the book as well as for my view on specific positions and arguments offered.

Let me start, then, by confessing that I find myself baffled by someone who can write about love, sex and desire and not mention, let alone explore, what at least some of the great poets and writers have had to say on these topics. How could one just leave out Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Stendhal, Proust, and countless others? Even if you think they have nothing to say of

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¹ Alexander PRUSS, *One Body: an Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013). All references to this book henceforth will be by reference to page number in parentheses in the main body of my text.

lasting value on these topics—not, in any case, the most plausible of views to take—, they can hardly be ignored. And what about some of the great philosophical explorations of these things, including those of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Sartre in modernity? And then there is Freud, who bent his whole genius to exploring such matters. He is not mentioned in this book, and even if you think that what he said was just confused nonsense, you cannot, surely, write as if he had never existed. Then again, there are the great filmmakers—Antonioni, Fassbinder, Rohmer—who have thought long and hard about these things. Yet, once again, they are never mentioned. The same might be said of music and opera, as if Mozart or Beethoven or Wagner or Debussy had nothing to teach us about love or our sexual nature.

You might defend Pruss by saying that he is exploring, and defending, a Christian view of love and sex, and that he therefore does not need to explore the work of those I have mentioned since none of them is Christian. Well, this might be so, but there are important novelists, filmmakers and the like who were Christian in various different ways and who reflected on the topics of interest to Pruss—Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, T.S. Eliot, Graham Greene, George Bernanos, Robert Bresson to mention but a few from modernity—but Pruss does not discuss these either. And, in any case, if you think you do not need to explore non-Christian points of view in an exploration of a Christian sexual ethic, you effectively isolate it from forms of the challenge and enrichment that might come at it from other quarters. If such an ethic is to be responsive to our lives and help us make sense of them or enlighten them in some way, it needs to respond to, think about, face up to, other views. Otherwise, it simply proceeds in a hermetically sealed way, appealing to those who are content with a highly abstract manner of proceeding that can only doubtfully engage with the reality of these things.

But that, unfortunately, in my judgement, is what Pruss offers us: there is, in this book, a serious lack of engagement with the reality of our condition, a consistent moralizing of love and sexual desire, and a failure to take seriously approaches other than those sanctioned by the highly limited conception of philosophy it uses in its approach, one that precisely does not see itself as in need of contact with wider culture to explore and make good its claims. And by ‘moralizing’ I do not mean that he makes moral judgements about love and sexual desire: that is inevitable, since we have no understanding of what these would look like wholly free of moral judgement or without moral categories being brought to bear on them. I mean that the moral judgements he makes are unresponsive to, ride roughshod over, vast

swathes of ordinary human experience of these things, condemning that experience in such a way as to fail to do anything much to ‘preserve the phenomena’ or see what might be valuable or important in them. ‘To moralize’, as I mean it here, is to be censorious, rather than to make moral judgements in an attempt better to understand.

LOVE

By way of beginning my discussion, let me give an example, one concerning Pruss’ understanding of love. Having claimed that love ought to be ‘appropriate’, by which he means that the love ought to be a love for the beloved as he or she in fact is, Pruss worries about whether such a love might issue in some wrong ‘when one’s willing of a good to one person conflicts with the willing of a good to another, in a way that wrongs one of the two’ (21). Pruss denies that such is possible, and his denial is instructive:

Now, indeed, many think that there could be such a conflict. People can wrong strangers, seemingly out of love for those close to them. However, I claim that when one wrongs one person out of love for another whom one is striving to benefit, then one has inappropriate love for at least one of the parties. For if one appropriately loves the person whom one wrongs, then one loves him or her for being a fellow person having the dignity of personhood, just as the party whom one is trying to benefit has the dignity of personhood. And it is a dubious benefit that one’s alleged beneficiary gains at the expense of the victim. For to be the recipient of ill-gotten gains is harm—one is at least in danger of being placed in debt to the victim. An appropriate love will not make one’s beloved the recipient of ill-gotten gains, since an appropriate love will recognize the beloved as a member of society interconnected with the victim of the action. Thus, an appropriate love for both parties will not benefit one at the expense of a wrong to the other. (21)

What is this argument supposed to show? Is the claim that, as a matter of fact, if someone loves two people ‘appropriately’ then he just never will harm one of them for the good of the other? But this claim is simply not true. At least, it is not true except on a highly moralized conception of love, for it clearly is the case that one can love two people and harm one for the sake of the other. It happens all the time. Think of Antigone in her relation to Creon and Polynices. Indeed, people can hurt those whom they love without anyone else being involved in the relevant sense precisely because they love them, and that love can still be ‘appropriate’. Think of Cordelia,

whose whole point, indeed, is that she loves her father appropriately. This may be terrible or tragic, but to deny this is simply to give into a moralized conception of love according to which anyone who does what it is plainly possible to do does not love ‘appropriately’. You can rule out *a priori* moral dilemmas (of the kind in question) if you like by saying that only those who do not love ‘appropriately’, in Pruss’ sense, are subject to them. But such an argument has nothing to say about, or to, those whose love, whilst not ‘appropriate’ in Pruss’ sense, is real love nonetheless—appropriate, that is, in any ordinary sense—, and leads them into situations where they can be broken by it and be willing to break others—which is, as George Orwell remarked, central to what human love is.

In any case, the whole argument only achieves any semblance of credibility by operating at such a level of abstraction that it seems it is saying something clear when it is not. What does it mean to say that ‘an appropriate love will recognize the beloved as a member of society interconnected with the victim of action’? What does ‘society’ mean in this context? Those who live near where I live? Or my work colleagues? Or those who live, as I do, in London, or the South of England? Or Europe? Or everywhere? The obscurities mean that the whole idea of being interconnected is unclear. There are, after all, innumerable ways in which individuals can be interconnected with others, and Pruss glosses over them with his invocation of ‘society’. Or again, what does the ‘dignity of personhood’ mean, and what does it mean by way of how we should treat others? It is just too late in the philosophical day to suppose that we know clearly enough what this means so that we can appeal to it, just like that, to make the kinds of claim Pruss wants to make. Moreover, one can fully respect someone else’s dignity of personhood and nonetheless harm him or her: it is not as if respect for someone can never involve harming that person. Quite the contrary: it might be a sign of my respect for another that I do this, for that can involve treating the other as fully adult. Johnson, to take one obvious example that springs to mind, was often pretty savage with Boswell, and he was so not simply while respecting him, but because he respected him: his harshness was the very vehicle, in some contexts, of his respect. In any case, as I said, the whole notion of human dignity is obscure. I let Jean Améry, who was tortured by the Gestapo and thought long and hard about what it might be, make the point:

I must confess that I do not really know what that is: human dignity [*Menschenwürde*: ‘dignity of personhood’ would be a possible translation]. One per-

son believes he loses it when he finds himself in a situation in which it is impossible for him to take his daily bath. Another thinks that he is bereft of it when he has to speak a language other than his mother tongue before the authorities. Here human dignity is linked to a certain physical comfort, there with freedom of expression, in another case perhaps to access to sexual partners of the same sex. I do not know, therefore, if the person who is beaten by the police loses his human dignity.²

Beyond all that, Pruss' idea that one should love 'appropriately' is odd. Of course he is right, in a sense, that, to use his example, one should love one's daughter as one's daughter, and not as God, but things are more complicated than that. A man's daughter may also be his friend, or colleague, or rival: Is there a way of loving one's daughter as one's daughter that is different from loving her as one's colleague? Surely there is, but Pruss does not explore the issue or what it would entail. Moreover, and much more importantly, if we are to love a person as he or she is, then we have to acknowledge that all human beings are, in various ways, and to various degrees, vain, selfish, greedy, envious and so on. To love someone as he or she is would be to love that person as being that, and that means that we might well conclude—if we suppose, as Pruss does, that love in its 'appreciative aspect' should be love for a person's (morally) good qualities—that the love we offer should be limited in various ways. But, of course, the point is that we love others in ways that they do not merit, or, to put it another way, we love them not simply in spite of, but because of, their faults, and if we did not then we would not love anyone. Love is always more than is merited, that is, is always more than for what the person loved actually is. Pruss says that we might suppose that 'in loving someone as *more* than she is I would not do her any wrong, but that is not so, since there are goods that are appropriate to one person but not to another. If I love my daughter as God, it makes no sense to feed or teach her, say' (20). But Pruss is wrong: when we love, we always love the beloved as more than he or she is, because we love others in a way that their weak, frail, wasteful human nature could never justify. That seems to me to be a deep lesson of Christianity.

Pruss is aware of the issue, but his attempt to deal with it is unsatisfactory. He speaks of a need for a charitable blindness to the bad characteristics of the one loved, but then, appealing to the idea that evil is a lack or privation, claims that 'when we see what is truly *there* in someone we love, we

² Jean AMÉRY, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne. Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2008), 55.

will not see the evils, since they literally do not exist' (26). Apart from the invocation of a highly contentious account of evil as a privation of good, this manner of approaching things has an air of unreality about it: not only does it seem contradictory (you cannot be blind to characteristics that are literally not there—there is nothing to be blind to), it also mistakenly makes it seem that loving another is a matter of, or involves, some kind of weighing up of the merits and demerits of his or her traits of character, whereas it is more a matter of loving the mysterious, indefinable complete presence of the other, what Hannah Arendt calls the 'who' of a person, something that is revealed in being with the other but cannot be described or articulated discursively. That is partly what I had in mind in speaking of love for another as involving love of his or her faults and in saying that love is always beyond merit.

Actually, Pruss broaches some of these issues in discussing Kierkegaard's account of love. His portrayal of Kierkegaard is highly contentious, based as it is on a few comments from the latter's *Journals and Papers*, wholly ignoring the masses of secondary literature which give a much more nuanced account of Kierkegaard's position. Be that as it may, he misses the point that, when Kierkegaard says that love is not based on reasons, key to what he wants to say that is love is a *mystery*. Then, rejecting the claim that, on his reading, Kierkegaard is making to the effect that one simply chooses whom one loves—a claim that is no more plausible in this context than it is in the case of faith, the latter being the view that Pruss ascribes to him—Pruss suggests that Kierkegaard is left with the claim that 'love is grounded in chance external circumstances' (38). Pruss rejects this view on the grounds that such an account 'does not appear compatible with our nature as rational choosers' (38). The whole vocabulary of 'rational choosers' seems to me clearly misplaced in the context of love, especially, perhaps, the romantic love that Pruss goes on to discuss. ('What we love is not up to us', says Harry Frankfurt pithily, in a discussion that overlaps with mine in many ways.³) In any case, Pruss clearly does not do justice to the massive element of chance in whom one loves: it is a matter of chance that one meets a particular person, in these and these circumstances, at this and this point in one's life, and it is a matter of chance that this person happens to appeal to one for these and these reasons. And so on. All this is explored in depth by Stendhal in his great work on love, but Pruss, as I noted earlier, does not advert to it.

Most contentiously, perhaps, Pruss claims that 'we are obliged to love everyone' (19), that 'everyone ought to be loved unconditionally' (42), that

³ Harry G. FRANKFURT, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 49.

‘[w]e ought to have an unconditionally committed love for everyone’ (47). He has Scripture on his side for that. But, however that may be, he does nothing to explore what that actually means. You cannot just *say* this. You need to say what it would actually involve if one were to live in such a way as to take it seriously. If I really were to love everyone, how could I sit here writing an essay on a piece of philosophy? Out there, right now, there are millions of suffering, tormented, anguished people. If I am obliged to love them, then how could I sit here, writing this paper, ignoring them? It sounds fine to say that one is obliged to love everyone, but if one really meant it, if one really believed it, I find it hard to think that one could just carry on with one’s comfortable middle-class life. I can hardly imagine Jesus leading the kind of life I lead: he was a radical revolutionary, hostile to bourgeois values and intent on making people live in a truly self-sacrificing way. That is also how others have seen him, including, in recent philosophy, Simone Weil, who really did take the injunction to love others seriously and sought genuinely to live in the light of that belief. Or again, if we are obliged to love everyone, then we are obliged to love our enemies, as Jesus said and as Pruss notes (46). It may just be a gap in my experience, but I have yet to meet a Christian who is remotely close to doing that, or, at the very least, is appropriately troubled at his or her failure to live up to that ideal. I have no idea whether Pruss would agree with me concerning the figure of Jesus, but I cannot see that the life most of us (readers of Pruss’ book and this paper, for example) can be remotely consistent with the idea that we are obliged to love everyone. Pruss does not explore this, so I do not know if he would agree with me. But he ought, in my judgement, to have explored it. Otherwise, his claim sits dead on the page: edifying, no doubt, but costing the moral conscience nothing.

Of course, Pruss accepts the Christian idea that love is not self-seeking: it seeks, he tells us, ‘the joint good of the lover and beloved’ (15). I do not deny, of course, that love can be like this, but again we see Pruss’ moralization at work. For the truth is that a great deal of love—real, admirable, human love—is (in part, at times) self-seeking. This is part of a larger truth, best articulated by La Rochefoucauld in his *Maximes*: ‘The vices enter into the composition of the virtues as poison enters into the composition of medicines. Prudence assembles and tempers them, and uses them against the ills of life.’ Vanity and self-love enter into all kinds of virtues, helping to make them what they are. Of course, as La Rochefoucauld insists, they have to be tempered, but this is not the same thing as extirpating them. And love cer-

tainly has its own share of egoism. One reason for this is that love expresses a *need* of the other. In an acute discussion of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Allan Bloom brings this out magnificently. Speaking of the love of the eponymous couple share, he writes:

This is not the confident and giving love so much admired in modernity. It is utterly selfish, and perhaps reveals more accurately the true nature of love as desperate need of each other. To my mind, Cleopatra's complaint to the dying Antony, 'Hast thou no care of me?' (IV.xv.60), is a more powerful statement of love than are selfless expressions of sorrow or regret. Each is directed to the other by ineluctable need. Their admiration for each other means that they must possess each other no matter what the consequences. It is a hunger and a possessiveness more powerful than any other. Few men or women are capable of such selfish self-forgetting.⁴

Pruss would have to say that this is no love, that such selfishness cannot be (a form of) love. But that just shows that he is interested in moralizing the experience of love, telling us that something we can all recognize to be love is not so. Of course, Antony and Cleopatra are an extreme case, no doubt, but in them is writ large what is present in all love, erotic love particularly, but not only. In the end, Pruss is not *really* interested in helping us understand ourselves; he is not *really* interested in getting clear on what we are. He is interested, rather, in presenting a view of things that articulates a kind of ideal—an ideal presented *as if it were* merely an account of what we are. That is one of the things in the service of which his highly abstract style of writing works.

Still, Pruss' resistance to the idea that love is always partly egoistic leads him to worry about self-love, since Christianity requires one to love others as one loves oneself. How, he asks, can there be self-love if love does not seek its own, that is, is not egotistical? He offers two solutions. The second of these, which involves the idea that in loving oneself what one is doing is loving oneself as 'a human being in the image and likeness of God' (47), probably makes sense as an ideal from a Christian point of view, but I suspect that when Jesus demanded of us that we love our neighbour as ourself he had something much more down-to-earth in mind. Be that as it may, here is the first of the solutions Pruss gives:

[T]he virtuous life is our paramount good. In genuine love of oneself, one seeks what is good for oneself. But what is good for oneself is the life of virtue, and central to such a life is care for others. Thus, genuine self-love re-

⁴ Allan BLOOM, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 305.

quires us to pursue the good of others, and in pursuing the good of others we promote our own good. (46).

It is hard to believe that anyone, philosopher or not, could allow himself to make such claims. This bland dismissal of the possibility of conflict between one's own good and that of others can hardly be credited. Even worse, perhaps, is the assertion that one's own good is the life of virtue. It is completely obvious that those who are virtuous can be in various ways unhappy or miserable, or fail in life, or be discontented and the like. Pruss, in common with many virtue theorists, is denying this, but the point is not that his claim might be false, as I am sure it is. It is that Pruss presents it as if it were obviously true—his lack of discussion of it makes it clear that he thinks this. But that is hardly credible.

In all this, there is in Pruss' approach a kind of tone or style which is wholly alien to the way some others have written about love and which insists on a kind of explicitness concerning love that can only seem to ground and articulate it by making it seem easier and shallower than it is. It might help to see what I mean if we advert for a moment to a comment that John Jones made in a discussion of Greek tragedy. Just before he leaves his daughters forever, Oedipus says to them:

My children, this day you will lose your father; here and now there perishes all that is I, and you will not any longer bear the burden of me—a heavy burden, my children, as I know. And yet one word, quite alone, resolves all this pain. That word is love. Love was the gift you had from me as from no one else, and now you must live out your lives without me.

Jones writes: 'He is not using the word solely to denote the fact of his love, he is looking at the word as at a half-domesticated life which remains still outward and alien at the moment of appropriation'.⁵ This is a fine comment. It is so not least because it captures so well the bafflement of human beings in the face of their love and what, whom, they love. It records the fact that it not just that human beings might fail in various ways to love as they might wish to, but that love is always in the process of being remade, that it has a history for individuals and for cultures, that human beings always and necessarily fall into confusion when thinking about what love is and trying to embody it in their lives. All of this is foreign to Pruss' discussion, for he writes as if getting clear on the nature of love were a matter of solving some intellectual puzzle or other, whereas it is more about bearing witness to the

⁵ John JONES, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), 234.

intractable recalcitrance of human experience, the stubbornness of what we face. Writing about love ought to be a matter of tracing through one's confusions and failures in the relevant context, trusting them to enlighten us. For, in general, we all have, in everyday life, abstract and unrealistic notions about love (and many other things besides)—and we do so because that helps us conceal from ourselves our bafflement. Philosophy ought to seek to pull against that, helping us to see love for what it really is, not give into it.

THE MEANINGFULNESS OF SEXUALITY AND REPRODUCTION

So much for what Pruss says about love. Turning now to what he says about sex, I am happy to agree with him that sexuality is meaningful. But much more contentious is his repeated insistence that it is *objectively* meaningful. His use of this term, and thus what he means, is unclear in the extreme. I discern three possibilities. Firstly, he draws a parallel between the way in which our senses give us evidence for the existence of material objects and the way in which our caring about things gives us evidence that there are things that matter (64–5). In both cases we have evidence for something objective. But, he seems to be implying, there could be, in both cases, something that exists which wholly escapes the evidence. Yet if we take this analogy seriously, the point is not plausible. It makes sense to think that there might be material objects that exist wholly independently of our sensory perception of them, but it makes no sense to think that something might matter even though no one has ever cared about it and we might never care about it. In whatever way it is true that things matter objectively, it cannot be with the same kind of objectivity that material things have. Secondly, he could mean that, to say something matters is to say that, as a matter of fact, all human societies have cared, and do care, about the thing in question. But he rejects this, claiming that 'something could happen to matter in every culture without mattering objectively' (67). That strongly suggests that he accepts the first option, which is, as I have suggested, quite implausible. The third possibility is that, when he says that something—for example, sex—matters objectively, what he means is that *every* human being ought to care about that thing, a thing that is, in fact, cared about by all human cultures, but not by every individual in any given culture. But that is just a way of expressing a particular view of the thing in question, in this case, human sexu-

ality, dressed up as a philosophical position. On this reading of Pruss' claim, if there really are human beings who think that human sexuality is not meaningful, who think, that, as he quotes Marcus Aurelius as saying, sex is 'is the rubbing together of pieces of gut, followed by spasmodic secretion of a little bit of slime' (66), then to insist that such a view of sex is wrong because sex matters *objectively* is simply to state a different conception of its value. The real work would go into justifying such a view.

The truth surely is that all human cultures have cared about sexuality and all human cultures will, just as they have always cared about and will care about birth and death: these are things that matter to human beings and always will do. They are amongst the mysteries of human life, and partly constitute what we are. To want more than that, to want that these things should matter in some further way, is a dead end. It is enough that they matter this way. But this leaves open two things: firstly, that the way in which sexuality matters to human beings admits of many different sexual practices, traditions, forms of life; secondly, that there might be some individual human beings for whom sex means little, or even—perhaps: I shall return to this—really is nothing more than Marcus Aurelius presents it as being, and that is just the way things are, even if there are no whole cultures that could see sexuality in that way. But, of course, this would not satisfy Pruss: in saying that sexuality matters *objectively* what he ultimately wants is to say, as I noted, that *every* human being ought to care about it, and ought to care about it *in the same way*, because it matters in the same way for all human beings (that is, in his terms, *objectively*, whether they know it or not). But that expresses, as I have suggested, a particular conception of the value of human sexuality.

So what is Pruss' conception of such value? Let us start by wondering whether anyone actually does think about sex as Marcus Aurelius does. Maybe. But I am not sure. The comment gets part of its force from its expressing a transgressive view of sex, just as would any way of acting sexually that manifested it. But if someone acts transgressively in this way, that only makes sense if he or she knows this to be so and is, in one way or another, thrilled by that. That would show that the person in question knew perfectly well that sex was meaningful (though he or she might not share your, or my, or Pruss' conception of that meaning). Marcus Aurelius' point is surely not best read as a considered judgement about sex that, in his view, it would be good for us to share, but, rather, as an ironic reminder about sex and a desire that we not take it too seriously, that we be ironic about it. That

would parallel Montaigne's point that even the king sitting on the highest throne is sitting on his arse. It would be absurd to read him as saying that this is all a king is—an arse on a seat. What he is wanting is to get us to be a bit more ironic about things and thus free us from fears that are unnecessary—in this case, fear of royal or political power. Pruss misses the irony in what Marcus Aurelius says, taking it as the assertion of a philosophical position which he supposes it his task to refute.

But, of course, Pruss' failure to see the irony in Marcus Aurelius' comment goes hand-in-hand with the fact that he certainly does not want us to be ironic about sex or not take it seriously. He wants, at all costs, that we be very earnest about these things.

I am happy to agree with part of his seriousness, namely, with the claim that the fact that the sexual organs are reproductive organs is central to our understanding of what they are. But it is not possible to infer from this, as Pruss supposes, that the bodies of the lovers are, in the sexual act, 'striving for reproduction' (136). Such a way of understanding would involve an implausible teleological conception of our nature: the bodies are not striving for anything; they are just doing what they do, just as the eye, when we see using it, is not striving to see. The person whose eye is damaged may be striving to see, but it is not the eye that is doing this. Our organs are not *for* anything, and they have no *function* or *purpose*: they do what they do, well or ill. Still less does the human body have a *purpose* or *function*; it is not *for* anything. That, of course, is one of the conclusions to be drawn from evolutionary theory. Pruss is well aware of the difficulties in this area. No doubt he is right that, on a theistic conception of human life, the claims I have just made might be mistaken. But if you grant that premise, you will be able to get to a multitude of conclusions that could not conceivably be thought to be the product of neutral philosophical analysis, despite the fact that Pruss seems to think that he can get to his conclusions even if one rejects theism (95). Moreover, insisting that, irrespective of theism, it is just a 'basic truth' that parts of our bodies, and, by implication, our bodies, are to be understood in terms of 'an irreducible notion of purpose that reduces neither to selective advantage nor to the purposes a designer might have' (105) is problematic, as Pruss grants. After all, as he says, working out what the purposes of things are is very difficult. It looks easy to say that 'minds are for knowing, eyes for seeing, and human front teeth are for cutting' (105), but it is not: following Freud, Nietzsche and others, we have good reasons for supposing that, whatever else (human) minds are, they are mechanisms for *not* know-

ing, for *concealing* reality in various ways, even if, in other ways, we say that they are also mechanisms for knowing. More generally, we cannot just read off the purpose of an organ from an inspection of it. ‘Our hands have as their purpose the manipulation of objects’ (99) says Pruss. But why should we think that the function of the hands? We use them for caressing, hitting, shielding the eyes from the sun, cleaning, covering the mouth when yawning, gesticulating and adding emphasis to what we say, defending against attack and much else besides. If we say that all this is using the hands for the manipulation of objects then, of course, the notion of purpose become vacuous, because it just comes down to saying that the hands have the purpose of doing whatever it is that human beings use them to do.

In any case, even if we could say unequivocally what the purpose of any given organ is, we cannot conclude that we ought to use it for that purpose, still less that we ought to use it *only* for that purpose. That just does not follow. If our hands had the purpose of manipulating objects, it would not follow from that that we ought to use them for that or that we ought not to use them for other things. Pruss knows perfectly well that the purpose of an organ, if it has one, does not exclude its use for other purposes, and he rightly sees nothing wrong with this (135). But he suppresses the point that we cannot read off from an organ’s purpose (assuming it has one) that it ought to be used for that purpose. If the sexual organs are for reproduction, it does not follow that they ought to be used for this purpose, not even if we grant that they may or even ought also to be used for other purposes. This no more follows than it follows from the fact (if it is a fact) that human teeth and the digestive system are for the consumption of animal flesh (amongst other things) that we ought to eat meat. You cannot refute vegetarianism so easily.

We could put the point this way. Suppose we granted that, after all, it makes sense to think that the sexual organs have the purpose of reproduction and that this is what the lovers’ bodies are striving for. It still does not follow that there is anything morally untoward about a person who systematically thwarts this purpose with the use of contraceptives or through sexual activity with a person of the same sex or through masturbation or whatever. For, even if it is true that we can be mistaken about what we want, as Pruss rightly insists, and even if we say that, in ‘desiring [sexual] union, the members of the couple are implicitly desiring the biological striving [namely, for reproduction] that constitutes it’ (146), it does not follow that thwarting this implicit striving is suspect in any way. This no more follows than it follows from the fact, if it is a fact, that the body is, in eating, striving (implicitly) to

eat meat, that one ought to eat meat. We might have good reasons to resist what our activity is implicitly striving to achieve. A vegetarian might, that is, be able to agree, firstly, that human teeth and the human digestive system are for the eating of meat (have this as, *inter alia*, their purpose); and secondly, that, whether anyone knows it or not, his or her body is striving to eat meat (at least on occasion) when he or she is eating, even if he or she has no conscious desire to eat meat; and still think that there is no good reason to eat meat, or, more weakly, that there are good reasons not to eat meat. You cannot use some biological naturalism to solve moral problems. At least, you cannot unless you have an evaluatively-loaded conception of nature, for example, by conceiving it in theistic terms.

None of this is to say, of course, that human nature is irrelevant to morality: any moral view or theory, for example, that ignored the fact that we are sexual beings would be wholly implausible. But it is clear, as I said earlier, that that sets only extremely weak parameters on any plausible (sexual) ethic, since it is wholly compatible with a multitude of different sexual forms of life for human beings.

Since the whole idea of the lovers' bodies striving in the act of love for reproduction is implausible, it follows that it cannot be used to ground, as Pruss would have it, the fact, if it is a fact, that, in this act, the two persons are one body.

That is, in any case, not a fact. Pruss knows that it has no meaning in a 'metaphysically or biologically literal [sense]' (91). And the truth is, surely, that such a way of speaking—that is, the idea that lovers become one body in the act of love—is an expression of a certain conception of value, the manifestation of a certain moral vision of the (human) world. There is simply no way of making it plausible in a wholly neutral way. Pruss' talk of one body is irreducibly metaphorical, and no set of reflections on the relation between soul and body can deliver the desired conclusion, for the idea that 'our souls are not just ghosts moving the machinery of our body, but...that in virtue of which our bodies are alive' (92) is itself metaphorical or, if you prefer, the expression of a certain conception of value. You have to accept and be moved by the vocabulary of the soul animating the body to get the point Pruss is making. Furthermore, if it were a merely neutral or literal way of speaking, it would not avail Pruss, because any literal way of construing the relation in question could not, as such, move one to speak in terms of the union of two people in the act of love as becoming one body. In short, Pruss is expressing a certain moral conception of the relation we stand in to our

bodies, and that is not a conception that can be shown to be the only one that should be accepted. If someone thinks of his body as a thing he uses for pleasure in sex, and that this raises no real moral concerns, then he cannot be shown to be making some kind of philosophical mistake. If you think his conception of value shallow, you will not get him to see things otherwise by telling him that ‘to unite bodies without uniting souls would be to neglect the body as a living thing, to treat it as something it is not’ (92). That is just not true: ‘the body as living thing’ is not univocal, meaning only the conception of it that Pruss has in mind. It can mean, and does mean, different things to different people in different contexts and it can mean, and does mean, different things to the same person in different contexts or at different moments or times of his life. The most vulgar star of a pornographic film can distinguish between the body as living thing and the body as dead thing. If you think, as Pruss does, that such a person is not treating the body as a living thing, then this can only mean: treating it *really* or *truly* as a living thing, where ‘really’ and ‘truly’ express Pruss’ conception of value.

Pruss draws particular normative conclusions from his reflections, conclusions which, he says, while they do not follow directly from those parts of his thinking to which I have devoted attention in this paper, nonetheless depend on them, particularly on what he says about love. For, he claims, whilst it is true that exhalation does not have the primary purpose of blowing out candles but there is nothing wrong with doing this, a parallel claim does not apply to sex. He claims that, granted that the sexual organs are for reproduction, it still does not follow straightaway that they should not be used for other purposes. Nonetheless, he says, it can be shown that they should not be, since ‘there is a higher standard [than applies to exhalation] for the way we deal with sexual processes. One reason for this is that sexuality is closely tied to love, and whatever directly concerns love must abide by the highest standards’ (157). ‘Another reason,’ he says, ‘is the sacredness of that which is tied to the reproduction of life’ (157). His conclusions include the claims, amongst others, that (what he calls) positive contraception is always wrong (267); that ‘masturbation, oral sex and anal sex, at least when done for the sake of pleasure outside the context of unitive sexual intercourse, are wrong’ (330); and that homosexuality—‘same-sex sexual activity directed at orgasm’ (373)—is morally wrong.

Let us focus on Pruss’ account of the relation between love and sex. His basic thought is that ‘[r]omantic love is defined by a tendency toward the sexual’ (160) and that ‘[s]exual union is a consummation of romantic love’

(164). He then has various subarguments to the effect that romantic love seeks ‘union extended over time’ (164) and finds its consummation in a commitment to a lasting relationship on the part of the couple, which commitment ‘can extend the biologically momentary nature of the union in intercourse’ (164). To refuse such commitment is, he says, a lack of integrity because it is a failure ‘to act as united embodied individuals, individuals who have body, mind, and will’ (172). I have already discussed the last point, that concerning the union of body and soul: Pruss is clearly, once again, expressing his own conception of value here as if it were some kind of neutral datum that could get us to moral conclusions. More of interest for the moment are his claims about the relation between romantic love and sex. One first point to make is that Pruss seems to be elevating here a local conception of the relation between love and sex to a metaphysical principle, for it is clear that many cultures, including Western culture at different times, have not thought of love and sex as related in the way in which Pruss suggests they are. This is one reason why marriage in the past was more a matter of securing the lineage of the family and shoring up property and the like than it was a matter of love or emotional intimacy. Moreover, even if it is true that love and sex are related as Pruss suggests they are for some, or even many, people, or for some or many people some of the time or in some contexts, they are not so for all. To put it another way: it may be true that the relation in question is one of the recurrent features of human experience, but there are many other ways of thinking of the relation. It is perfectly possible, for example, to be sexually attracted to someone whom one does not love and has no intention of loving, and with whom one does not want to have a long commitment. For some, that is a problem, and they would like things to be otherwise. But others might be untroubled by it. That, surely, is a deeply characteristic feature of human life. And, in general, the relations between love and sex are much more complicated than Pruss allows. In Eric Rohmer’s film *Pauline à la plage* (1983), for example, the character Henri has a brief sexual liaison with Marion. For him, it is nothing more than a moment of pleasure and delight—he says at one point that he has loved and been loved and is tired of the whole business. But Marion, who is a deeply, though utterly typically, self-deceived person, and looking for romantic love, fools herself into thinking that Henri has offered, or promised, her more. What emerges is that it is Henri who is the more admirable, healthier person in his much more down-to-earth attitude towards human sexual relations. Or we might think of the great Austrian writer Adalbert Stifter, whose powerful

sexuality was satisfied by his lover, Fanni Greipl, but whom he could not marry as her parents forbade marriage to him. He later married Amalia Mohaupt, in an effort to give his life some order, but saw their childlessness as a punishment for his deep erotic need of Fanni, whose interest for him lay partly precisely in the fact that she had no understanding of his literary ambitions, indeed, in the fact that he could find physical release only with someone whom he did not respect intellectually. The conflict between morality, sexual desire, and erotic love, and the way in which they are hopelessly entangled with each other, at cross-purposes with each other, are manifest in all this. Or, to take one more example, we might think of Stefan Zweig's portrayal of Casanova as a man whose sexual encounters are self-giving and full of delight for his partners. In this, he is unlike Don Juan, whose partners are in reality victims. Whether Zweig is right about Casanova is neither here nor there: the key point is that a prodigious, roving sexual energy can be immensely generous (though it can, of course, also be mean, as goes without saying). The absence of love or a desire for union extended over time in both these kinds of case, that of Casanova and that of Don Juan, does not mean the cases are the same. Such things, as I say, are just part of human life, just part of what makes human life the distinctive thing it is. Indeed, were that not the case, it is highly unlikely that human sexual activity would so readily be the object of moral disapprobation. The problematic relation between love and sex is one of the standing difficulties and limitations of human life, though not for all individuals all the time, and Pruss knows this, because if he did not he would not be so morally censorious. Really, what he would like to do is to stop people behaving in certain ways and get them always to relate sex and love as he thinks they ought to be related and as they sometimes are related—what he calls, as we have seen, 'the highest standards'. Again we see his tendency to display a particular vision or ideal of sexual behaviour as if it could be arrived at by neutral philosophical analysis.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I wish to end with some brief general reflections on these conclusions of Pruss'.

If Pruss were right about what counts as sexually immoral then it would be the case, I imagine, that the overwhelming majority of human beings regularly engaged in immoral practices. There is nothing at all *a priori* im-

possible about that, of course. And, indeed, one might well say that human beings are a pretty (ethically) unappealing lot generally—a verdict I would certainly accept—and then say that their sexual activity is part of that. But, as I read Pruss’ book, I kept finding myself reminded of someone like Kant whose moral writings on sex express a deep distaste for such liaisons. A similar feeling for sexuality seems to haunt Pruss’ book as haunts Kant when he claims in his *Eine Vorlesung über Ethik* that as soon as one has satisfied one’s sexual appetite with another one throws that person away ‘just as one throws a lemon away when one has squeezed the juice from it’.⁶ And I was reminded too of a comment of Nietzsche’s: ‘Reality shows us an enchanting wealth of types, the profusion of an extravagant play and change of forms—and some...moralist comments: “No! Man ought to be *different*.”’⁷ It goes without saying that all individuals and all cultures must in various ways seek to confront in moral terms (but not only moral terms) their own variety: morality is always to some extent limiting. But the issue is to what extent this is so. I have suggested that we see various forms of moralization in Pruss’ argument, particularly with respect to the notion of love, which then works its way into his strictures on certain kinds of sexual activity. That is a way of saying, of course, that his approach seems, in a way, anti-human, or anti-life, as Nietzsche would say. What is at issue is the whole spirit of the book, which, in my judgement, manifests a kind of philosophical version of the desire to admonish, a longing to convert philosophy into an activity that will turn us all into the kinds of people Pruss could consider ‘morally upright’ (113). There is an anecdote about Samuel Johnson which comes to mind. When his monumental dictionary was complete he was congratulated by various delegations of people, including one of respectable ladies of London. ‘We are delighted to find that you have not included any indecent or obscene words in your dictionary,’ they said to him. ‘Ladies,’ replied Johnson, ‘I can congratulate you on being able to look them up.’ Like the ladies, Pruss seems to be on the lookout for obscenity, for he sees it in so many of the sexual practices of human beings that I would judge to be, not so much harmless, as simply part of the sort of thing it takes to make all sorts of things, to adapt a phrase from D.H. Lawrence. And, like the ladies’ curi-

⁶ Immanuel KANT, *Eine Vorlesung über Ethik*, ed. Gerd Gerhardt (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991), 177.

⁷ Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, ‘Moral als Widernatur’ § 6 in Volume VI of *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980).

osity, that curiosity itself manifests a kind of anxious cleanliness about these things. I felt myself, in reading the book, be confronted by a sense of things that I find alien, a view of life that seems to suggest that all we need to do is to be decent, well-meaning people and all will be well with the world, as if the world could be cured of its ills by, so to speak, clean laundry. No doubt what is at issue here is what William James called a ‘clash of temperaments’, temperaments that lie at the base of one’s philosophizing and in the light of which one sees the world and thinks about it. But my sense of life is, to use Yeats’ phrase, that we live in a ‘preposterous pig of a world’, where human beings are always defeated and the only thing that really matters is how one is defeated. On this view, morality itself is one of the tired and tiring things of the world, and one needs to be as suspicious of it as of everything else. Pruss’ confidence in it, his desire to wield it as he does, expresses, for me, a vision of things that philosophy ought to put into question and that life inevitably will undermine, if only one looks unblinkingly at what is there.⁸

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ALEXANDER PRUSS O MIŁOŚCI I ZNACZENIU SEKSUALNOŚCI

Streszczenie

W niniejszej pracy podejmuję zagadnienie miłości i seksualnego pożądania w ujęciu Alexandra Prussa. W moim przekonaniu Autor nie dostarcza przekonującego wyjaśnienia żadnego z tych pojęć. Jedną z racji jest pominięcie przez niego wielu kluczowych prac z zakresu filozofii i sztuki. Ponadto uważam, że proponowane przez Prussa rozumienie miłości i stosunku płcio-

⁸ I thank Marcin Iwanicki for helpful comments of an earlier version of this paper.

wego jest nazbyt moralizatorskie, co sprawia, że jego rozważania nie uwzględniają faktycznego ludzkiego doświadczenia tych spraw, a nawet je zafałszowują. Dowodzę również, że teleologia, do której odwołuje się Pruss, uzasadniając twierdzenie, że celem stosunku płciowego jest rozrodność, nie jest wiarygodna, a nawet gdyby było przeciwnie, to z takiej teleologii nie można by wyprowadzić wniosków moralnych, które chce z niej wywieść Pruss.

ALEXANDER PRUSS ON LOVE
AND THE MEANINGFULNESS OF SEX

S u m m a r y

In this essay I explore Alexander Pruss' conceptions of love and sexual desire. I argue that he fails to provide a convincing account of either and that one reason for this is that he ignores far too much relevant material in philosophy and the arts that needs to be taken into account in a thorough investigation of such matters. I argue further that Pruss' understanding of love and sex is highly moralized, meaning that his discussion is not at all sensitive to the actual human experience of these, but consistently falsifies them. I also argue that the teleology to which Pruss appeals in order to ground his claim that, in the sexual act, the bodies of the lovers are striving for reproduction, is implausible and, further, that, even were it not, we could not infer from such teleology the moral conclusions that Pruss wishes to extract from it.

Słowa kluczowe: miłość, stosunek płciowy, moralizatorstwo, teleologia.

Key words: love, sex, moralization, teleology.

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